From the Banks to the Breakfast Table With Your Fish

Following New York's Fish Supply From Its Source to the Market

By Robert B. Peck

THE distance between baked cod stuffed with oysters and the countless hordes that swims fifty fathoms deep on the Georges banks is not to be measured by the 400-odd miles that separate Fifth Avenue from the Georges. It is to be measured, rather, in terms of centuries—despite the steam trawlers which reap fifty fathoms deep as a harvester goes through a field of grain.

For steam trawlers, equipped with wireless, have not changed the fisherfolk. Their hardships are not less nor their strength to meet them than when Peter cast the net with his fellows on Galilee. Strong of arm and harsh of tongue they are to-day; and so doubtless were the men of Galilee, for nets tore in those days even as to-day; and that Simon who was called Peter was not wont to curb his feelings.

The implements, but not the men, have changed. "A man is born a fisherman or he is not a fisherman," said Bill Murray, a stocky veteran of the hardy crew that sails from the Beekman Street pier to the harvest on the Georges.

The Albatross, one of a fleet owned by the East Coast Fisheries Company, is a stout, high-bowed craft 165 feet long, driven by triple expansion engines with a speed of ten knots. By virtue of the lofty bow, which shoulders seas away from her deck, the Albatross has a forecastle which is all above deck and affords unusually light and commodious quarters.

In the waist of the boat, between the forecastle and the deckhouse, are the two hatches and the derrick mast with its windlass. It is there that the "bag" of fish, weighing from 5,000 to 10,000 or 12,000 pounds, is hoisted aboard, and it is there that the "checkers," or sorting and cleaning bins, are set up when the fishing grounds are reached.

In the overhang of the deckhouse beneath the pilot house is the great steam winch, with its wire cables, by which the net is hauled to the rail of the boat. The first compartment of the deckhouse is the oil house, where the oilskins of the men off watch are hung and where the steering gear operates. Aft of that is the engine room, and then the galley and mess room, likewise all above deck and lighted by a skylight as well as ports. Beneath the gallery and behind the engine room are the firemen's and oilers' quarters.

Radio strands span the two masts of the Albatross, the after one of which supports a little triangular sail which helps swing the boat into the wind when the engines are halted to haul the net. The snug quarters of the wireless operator are over the galley. All the time it is on the banks the Albatross is in communication with the office of the East Coast Fisheries Company by wireless, and keen executives, with an intimate knowledge of market conditions, can direct her cargo to the most favorable port. The captain's quarters adjoin the pilot house.

When the Albatross sailed from Beekman Street for the Georges shortly after noon, Thursday, March 27, Captain Peter D. Tobin was the skipper. It might be his last trip for some time to come, for he was slated for the post of shore captain of the trawling fleet and was to be succeeded by his mate, Bill Williams. Tobin is as amiable and capable a skipper as ever damned an oiler. At 6 a. m. Wednesday, April 2, the Albatross tied up at the Fish Pier, Boston, with 200,000 pounds of fish under hatches, the result of sixty hours' reaping on the Georges.

Off in The Fog

March 27 was a gray, dour day when the gray trawler backed neatly out of her berth around the fireboat George B. McClellan, coming within a few yards of a slatternly lighter that was coaling the Sound steamer Georgia on the opposite side of the slip, but never so much as smutting her sleek side.

Down in the Narrows the trawler met the Great Northern, coming in with a shipload of troops whose weight canted her sharply to port as they mustered along the rail gazing at the Statue of Liberty. The fishermen who were on deck set up a lusty cheering. There was no leader, no call for cheers, but they just broke out wherever a man happened to be standing, and until the Great Northern slid out of sight in the haze the men on the Albatross stood waving their caps—one, in fact, lost his in the exuberance of his welcome.

The lights on the Ambrose Channel buoys were gleaming in an early and threatening dusk as the Albatross wallowed seaward and the dory-built lightship was swinging high at her anchor. Past the pilot boats and the patrol vessel the Albatross slipped and presently was lifting to the heave of the Atlantic, already responding to the first puffs of a gale that swept the coast for the next two days.

Thursday night and Friday the Albatross was in the fringe of the gale.

"A patch of crooked water, that," said Fred Farnham, the second engineer. "We couldn't a fished if we'd been on the Banks."

And it is crooked water indeed when a trawler can't fish. All day Friday the sea swelled into huge hummocks, each traversed by valleys and ridges of water in which the Albatross pitched while she climbed the rollers themselves and subsided as they rolled past.

Between the waves the horizon was scarcely 200 yards away. From their summits the view was wide and the skyline lumpy. Some of the biggest waves at a distance looked precisely like a landscape of winter hills, their summits white and their flanks black with forest.

That night it snowed.

The sun was shining when the men about to go on watch had their breakfast at 5:30 Saturday morning, but all along the horizon was a rim of clouds. Here and there the clouds were draped perpendicular to the sea like curtains, and when one of these curtains swept up to the Albatross it brought with it a fierce snow squall.

It was in such weather that the Albatross drove past the oil-burning trawler Pioneer, out of Gloucester, riding the seas head-on, and it was patent that the Banks had been reached. The lead showed forty-seven fathoms, and presently the watch on deck was busy oiling the blocks through which passes the gear that trails the trawl astern.

The trawl is a huge net which is dragged V-shaped behind the boat, with a bag the size of a balloon at its apex to receive the fish that are swept into it. On the other side of the bag are the wings of the net and these in turn are attached by cables to the "doors," which are the distinguishing marks of the trawler.

While steaming the "doors" are slung between the rail and the braced, inverted U's of steel, from the topmost curve of which hang the blocks from which the doors are dropped into the sea. Each door is about fourteen feet long and four and a half feet wide. They are made of two-inch planks, bound with iron, and are dark from many immersions. Two are carried on each side, one just aft of the forecastle and one amidships, so that the trawl may be set from either side of the vessel.

The Finny Harvest Starts

It was soon after noon on Saturday that a short blast of the whistle announced that the Albatross was ready for the harvest. The net which was lashed along the rail on the starboard side was cleared of its wrappings and each wing made fast to one of the "doors" on that side of the vessel and the wire cables from the winch were made fast each to a "door."

Fishermen in oilskins along the rail were dumping the net overboard as the winch began to grate like a huge coffee mill and by the time the "doors" had been lifted clear of the rail the net was in the water. At a signal the spools of the winch began to spin backward and the "doors" splashed into the water as the cables paid out.

The length of the cables is regulated by the depth of the water and the speed of the boat. The trawling speed is about four knots and the depth of the Georges is about forty-five or fifty fathoms. The trawls drag along the very bottom.

When enough cable has been paid out a great iron hook is slipped over the outermost of the two cables and travels down to the stern of the vessel carrying with it a wire cable. The slack of this cable lies doubled along the deck from winch to stern, paying out through the hands of a man stationed beside a block on the rail near the stern. When the hook has reached a point opposite him he slips its cable into the block and yells to the man at the winch to start his engine.

The winch tightens the cable bearing the hook and grapples the outer "door" cable close in to the side of the trawler, where it meets the inner or after cable. The man at the block in the stern slips them both into an iron clasp, which he locks with a pin and then shouts to the man at the winch to loosen the taut hook-cable.

When the First Catch Is Lifted

Then both the forward and after cables, attached to the doors, pass through this iron clasp, which a chain holds close to the side of the boat. Passing in at an angle and out at a reciprocal angle, the cables hold the "doors" ajar, as it were, and keep the net open. The job of grappling in the outer cable and driving home the pin that holds the clasp fast is a dangerous one, for sometimes the hook cable snaps under the tremendous strain, and when a half-inch wire cable snaps it's about as irresponsible as a shrapnel burst.

For an hour and a half the Albatross trawled on her first set. Then the pin in the clasp was knocked out with a blow of the sledge, the clasp popped open and the "door" cables sprang apart, separated by two-thirds the length of the boat and each running freely through the block in the top of its U-shaped support.

The "doors" were left hanging in the blocks and the net cables were carried to the winch, which then drew them up until the ends of the wing nets themselves came up over the sides, one opposite the winch and the other just aft of the forecastle. The rest had to be done by hand, just as fishermen have hauled from time immemorial.

Clad in oilskins, the fishermen reached far over the rail, each with a hook like a truckman's balehook in one hand, and as the Albatross dipped to a sea hauled the net inboard. So they work day and night on the Banks, for the trawling never ceases. At night electric lights illuminate the decks and a brief stretch of the slick, black, tumbling sea and the night watch, their oilskins glistening, heave and haul.

When a full bag heaves up through the troubled water the fishermen haul its very rim to the rail of the boat and whip a sling about it, which is fastened to tackle running through a block on the derrick mast. Then the winch hauls the net upward and inward like an inverted balloon, the fish shining silvery with the sheen of silk through its meshes.

Bins, called "checkers," each about 10 by 4 feet, are put together in the waist of the boat on both sides of the hatches. A couple of lines bring the hoisted bag of fish to a halt just over the forward bin next to the rail. Then Bill Murray or Jim King or another master of the craft reaches under the bulging bag and its tons of fish and deftly loosens a couple of half hitches which hold its bottom fast.

Then he dodges back to escape the shining cascade of fish which descends. Sometimes he isn't quick enough. Bill wasn't the night before the Albatross turned her bow toward Boston, and in a jiffy he was pinned to the deck beneath a shining pyramid. Only his head stuck out, and every time a fish slipped off the pile it slithered its final, leisurely way across Bill's face. Bill was vexed, and showed it in his language.

But that first set of the Albatross was almost a flat failure. Moreover, the net was torn in a score of places, apparently having dragged across a rock outcropping on the bottom. The trawl on the port side immediately was prepared and let go, and the fishermen lined up at the rail mending the net where necessary.

The set made on the port side hoisted four or five thousand pounds of fish, mostly cod and haddock, aboard. The trawl was set again, and then the splitting and cleaning began. Standing hip-deep in the bin of fish, a fisherman would seize the handiest by the gills, throw it over his knee, back uppermost, and rap it sharply at the base of the skull with the handle of his knife.

Almost in the same motion the fish was whirled belly-up and the keen knife slit it from gills to vent. A heave and it went hurtling across to a bin where a cleaner squatted. His arm plunged into the top of the slit and emerged at the bottom. The entire contents of the cavity came with it and were flung one way while the fish went another. Cod and haddock were sorted out as they were thrown and landed finally in a crate just aft of the open hatch. There two men stood with short-handled, three-tined pitchforks and tossed the fish into the hold as fast as they came.

In the hold they were packed in broken ice, a layer of ice and a layer of fish and then another layer of ice. If the trawling was good and the torn nets few fish piled up in the "checkers" faster than they could be got rid of.

The luck of the Albatross held good that Saturday afternoon and by dark 30,000 pounds of fish heaped the "checkers" high, while the gleaming figures in oilskins worked feverishly, now concentrated on the fish on deck, now hauling mightily at the nets and again repairing rent nets where necessary with flying fingers.

Sunday on Trawler Is "All Work and No Play"

Generally the night trawling is considered to be the best. The fish are said to lie deeper then, with not so many seeking food near the surface. That Saturday night proved an exception, however. The bags ran light and by daylight the "checkers" were fairly clear again.

Sunday dawned with a blue sky and soft wind. Feathery cloud banks still edged the horizon, but they were sluggish and remote. The sea, which had been a war-time gray or an ugly black since the start from New York, sparkled blue in the sunshine and rose lazily in easy-graded waves. Astern of the Albatross regiments of gulls had gathered. There were thousands upon thousands of them. They filled the air like a blizzard for half a mile or more astern, and other flocks which had settled upon the shining waters rose to join them.

The surface of the sea exploded with them like the bottom of a corn popper. The air above was darkened by their numbers. Always they flew into the wind across the wake of the Albatross and then swooped or drifted back, with a keen eye out at all times for the offal which ran from the waist.

They were port little fellows, white beneath, with their wings bordered with black above from shoulder to tip, then a scroll of Quaker gray and white edges to the after side of their wings. These birds were decorated also with three crescents of gray behind each eye like war paint and were the most pugnacious of any of the raucous, rollicking, swooping crew. Their tail feathers also were pointed with black.

Another gull had wings of Quaker gray, but had no black markings and was a larger and more inoffensive bird, readily giving way to the attacks of his smaller relative. Those with the black markings had black feet and the other gray-wings pink feet.

Then there were the ugly, brown-mottled gulls and another striking looking bird of wide wing-spread whose body was white and whose wings were jet black. Gannets appeared later, large yellow-headed birds, white elsewhere except for a tip of their wings which was black. The gannets did not feed close to the boat. They got their food by diving and would seize it far beneath the water.

Wheeling suddenly in mid-flight they would dive from a height of fifty feet or more with wings outstretched, closing up like an umbrella just before entering the water, which they hit with the impact of a projectile, sending spray high into the air.

When Gulls Hold High Feasts

These are the gleaners of the harvest field of the Georges. They or their twins are always there, 200 miles or more from the nearest land, ready to pounce upon and follow in the wake of the first fishing boat to appear. From the time the first sets are made until the boat leaves the banks the gulls are never far away, though sometimes whole regiments and divisions wheel off on other errands.

When the boat loses way to haul the nets and falls off into the trough of the sea, rolling from side to side, the scuppers sluice offal and the gulls hold high carnival. A clamor breaks loose like the sudden frenzy of shrill cries that come when a clear field opens to a runner on the football field. Gulls from the afterguard come hurtling up to the boat and hover with flapping wings above the first-comers, seeking in vain to drop down to where the sea boils an appetizing red, just in the wake of the screw.

Those in the upper strata find it impossible to reach the feast. They are buffeted upward by the beating wings of those below. The din is prodigious and the closely packed mass of feathered bodies and flailing wings almost inconceivable. Behind them the gannets are swooping and diving, sending up fountain jets in quick succession and close proximity as the heavier tidbits are washed astern.

Fair weather increases the number of gulls on the Georges, fishermen say, and that bright Sunday morning there were hosts and hosts of them. A bag of 10,000 pounds or more was hauled aboard soon after breakfast, and Captain Tobin staked out that bit of the Atlantic forthwith for his own, dropping overboard a buoy whose staff bore a white flag and a lantern. It was anchored in fifty fathoms, and back and forth the Albatross quartered the sea about it, as methodically as a reaper shears an oat field.

No other vessel was close, although there seldom is lack of company on the Banks. All day the sails of five or six fishing schooners notched the horizon. Most of them were loafing under foresail and jib, their dories out after cod. One was under full sail, evidently homeward bound. Monday the schooners edged up closer, one of them so near that two or three of its dories could be made out when they lifted on a wave.

Early that day the buoy was taken up and the Albatross sought other grounds. It was a day of speculation, surmise and rumor. There were about 150,000 pounds of fish in the hold. The question was, would the skipper start for market with that day's catch and, if so, what market? To "make" the market a boat must be at its pier by daylight Thursday at the latest. Wednesday is the best day.

The Albatross was two hundred miles off Cape Cod. New York was two days' run away and Boston one day's run. Most of the men aboard were Gloucester men like Bill Murray, East Boston men like Mike Murphy, or Roxbury men like Frank Doyle. The wiseacres were certain that the orders would come to steam for Boston by 2 o'clock Tuesday morning or to remain on the Banks until the following Monday and then head for New York.

For once the wiseacres were right. When the whining whisper of the wireless began to sound Monday night the word came from the office of the East Coast Fisheries Company to start for Boston. At 2:30 a. m. Tuesday the "doors" were fished up for the last time and the Albatross turned definitely southwest. Clocks aboard the Albatross were moved ahead to "summer time" the preceding midnight.

Hardest Worker Aboard

The relief of every one aboard, the release of the tension under which they had been working, was noticeable as soon as the engine began to throb its regular cadence. Every one had been working six hours on and six hours off—sometimes more on and less off—except John McGinnis, the cook since fishing began. The prospect of another week at it was not a welcome one.

The cook had been working about fifteen hours a day until the fishing started; then he apparently worked twenty-four. He cooked and washed dishes for twenty-eight men. Breakfast for the men going on watch at 5:30, and for those going off watch at 6 o'clock. Six hours later came dinner, and six hours later supper. But that was not all. McGinnis and his "shipmate" galley range were busy not only all day but all night. This came from the "muggin' up" that was done by the watch on deck.

To "mug up" is to dodge into the galley for a snack while on duty. The Albatrossers, hearty trenchermen all, "mugged up" with a regularity that must at times have penetrated even the benignant, long suffering philosophy of John McGinnis. But John, gaunt, gray mustached, bespectacled, mild-eyed John McGinnis, never complained. At times he would opine that a craft of the size of the Albatross ought to boast of a mess boy at least, but it was as one who voices an ideal. With John McGinnis in mind the conviction is irresistible that cooks for steam trawlers must be born to the profession, even as fishermen are.

It was a bountiful table that old John set. Always there were cereal and eggs for breakfast—hard-boiled eggs forward, soft-boiled eggs aft—coffee and tea, sometimes cocoa, bread and butter, potatoes, meat of one sort or another, and numerous incidentals. Dinner and supper were equally liberal. The bread John baked himself, huge loaves, cut in thick slices the like of which no summer resort guest has seen since before the war. When John set his bread he had to lash the pans to the top of the coal bin so that they wouldn't slide off when the boat rolled.

Food Is Plentiful and Good on the Albatross

Sunday there was a chicken dinner, with enough left over, both white meat and dark, to feed several families.

The chicken dinner led to the story of the Grimesby egg, a tale which evidently was a standby on the Albatross, for it was greeted as an old friend. Two or three of the fishermen on the Albatross were Englishmen, skippers of their own craft out of Grimesby, who had been driven out of the North Sea fisheries by the U-boats.

"Not much like those Grimesby trawlers," said Richard Ford, a Boston man, through a drumstick as he glanced at John Huir, of Grimesby, England.

Huir was waiting for the bait. With the twang of his native town in every syllable he told the story of the Grimesby egg. It was a lurid, picturesque yarn as he related it, scorching hot with memory. In shoregoing language it was to the effect that Grimesby trawler captains did not mess with their crews, but carried special delicacies for their own tables. Every trawler leaving the port carried as a special tidbit an egg which would be soft-boiled for the skipper's breakfast. Some iconoclastic fisherman, doubtless a foreigner, once swiped the skipper's egg on a Thursday and ate it. The skipper was so put out that the offender, whom the corners of his mouth betrayed, got no pay for the trip.

Then he talked of the merits of the "Yorkshire hard," a coal of miraculous steaming power, which is used on English trawlers. He is going back to Grimesby in the fall if his luck holds.

At breakfast one morning Walter Bay, the wireless operator of the Albatross, got an egg on which something had been written with a pencil. It was the name of a girl in Huntsville, Ky. She probably would be surprised to know that nearly a month after she wrote her name on that egg it turned up among the "soft-boileds" hundreds of miles at sea in the hands of a twenty-year-old youth with Robinson Crusoe tendencies.

"Sparks" was the living proof that upon the post of a wireless operator has descended the glamour with which youth formerly surrounded that of cabin boy. He was fifteen years old when the war started, a De Witt Clinton High School student who was studying radio telegraphy in the evening.

With a war on, the boy decided that a seafaring life would be more adventurous than a career in De Witt Clinton High School. He got the post of junior wireless operator on the Nevadan, one of the first ships to sail from this country for a belligerent port. When he had the job he told his father, packed his suitcase and went aboard.

It was a cattle ship which was taking horses to France. The horses were wild, but the men who came aboard with them were wilder. One of them arrived wearing nothing save a pair of shoes. He had got rain soaked unloading the horses and had hung his clothes on the boiler of a locomotive to dry. When he returned to the spot the locomotive had gone, wearing his clothes.

War Stories On the Banks

When the ship actually sailed for dangerous waters, however, the boisterous spirits of the cattlemen were dampened. A sudden religious fervor seized them. They made a pulpit out of bales of hay, placed planks across other bales for pews and started in to hold services. It was largely a song service, and many of the singers were weak on the words of even the most familiar hymns. That did not daunt them, however, and they roared as lustily as the rest.

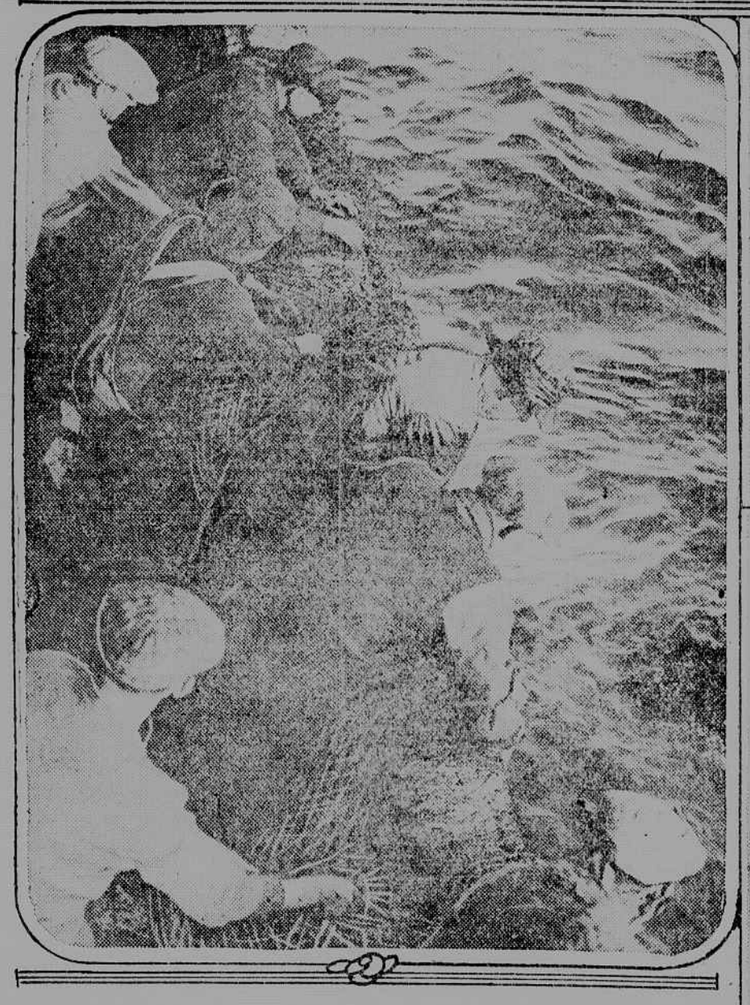
Overhead were the mate's quarters. With a revolver in his hand he started down the companionway to disperse the meeting. Services were adjourned at once. The worshippers seized pitchforks, posted themselves at the foot of the ladder and dared the mate to proceed. He thought better of his project.

Since then "Sparks" has sailed in many seas, slept in the cemetery outside Antofagasta, Chile, tramped the jungles bordering the Canal Zone and held a commission in the Tank Corps. Now he is chief wireless operator for the East Coast Fisheries Company. He is a youth who is prone to take a chance. It was to be noticed that when he left the table that morning in the galley of the Albatross there was only one eggshell on his plate, and that bore no writing.

The Albatross drove on, straight into the eye of a molten, crimson sun that suddenly had slipped to the horizon through a rift in a cloud bank like a penny through a slot. The engine chanted its monotonous measure which would cease only with morning, when the fisherfolk of the Albatross, worthy descendants of the sons of Gloucester and Marblehead who made Trenton possible and saved Washington at the Battle of Long Island, would wake to find the great fish pier of Boston towering alongside.

America's great fisheries are to-day kind indeed to the fisherfolk who delve into the wealth that lies buried there, and a golden revenue, it is said, is the reward that American enterprise enjoys for its labors in Uncle Sam's ocean food domains, of which the hardy trawler fisherman receives his respective share.

The Modern Methods of the Catch and the Life of the Fishermen Graphically Pictured



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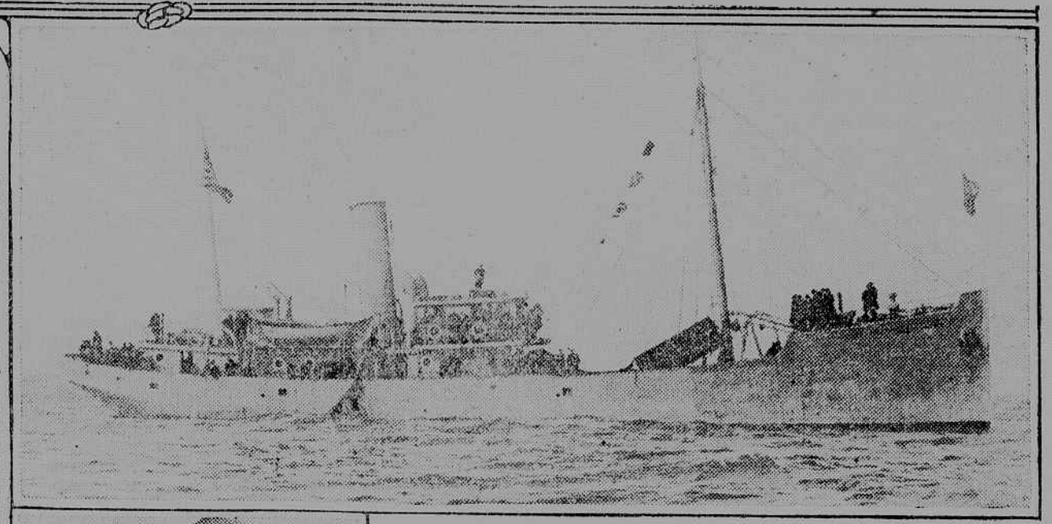
As the catch comes alongside



On a dash to the Banks—a latter-day wireless equipped fishing smack

One of the heavyweights

A pull of a rope and the net is emptied